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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAHRAN 000246

NOFORN
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARP JOSHUA HARRIS AND JEREMY BERNDT

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TAGS: KIRF, KISL, PGOV, PHUM, SA
SUBJECT: SAUDI AUTHORITIES CRACK DOWN ON SHIA IN AL-AHSA

REF: A. A. 09 DHAHRAN 210
B. B. 09 DHAHRAN 217
C. C. 09 DHAHRAN 8

DHAHRAN 00000246 001.2 OF 003

CLASSIFIED BY: Kevin Kreutner, Acting Consul General, EXEC, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)
SUMMARY

1. (C) Saudi authorities have stepped up discriminatory actions against Shia citizens in the Eastern Province (EP) oasis of al-Ahsa over the past year. Contacts point to the governor of al-Ahsa, HH Prince Badr bin Mohammad bin Abdullah Al Saud, as the main force behind the most recent uptick in sectarian arrests and mosque closings. However, they have also noted that these actions are likely sanctioned by the EP Governor, Prince Mohammed bin Fahd Al Saud, and the Interior Minister, Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. Several contacts have said that

the discrimination in al-Ahsa is alienating the Shia community, particularly the youth, and is compromising their sense of Saudi "national identity." END SUMMARY.

SECTARIAN ARRESTS CONTINUE IN AL-AHSA

2. (C/NF) During an August 17 visit to al-Ahsa, an oasis home to one million residents (more than half of which are estimated to be Shia), PolOff met with two prominent businessmen and Shia political activists: XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXX.

The former was recently elected to the XXXXXXXXXXXX, and both contacts participated in a USG-sponsored visit of American civil institutions XXXXXXXXXXXX.

3. (C/NF) XXXXXXXXXXXX provided PolOff with a list of 42 Shia individuals who have been arrested over the past year in al-Ahsa. The list included their age, length and dates of detention, and reason for the arrest. In most cases, these individuals were arrested for their "participation in religious celebrations" and for hosting Shia religious gatherings. In many cases, they were arrested this summer, although the alleged offenses occurred in January 2009 at Ashura religious processions. Our contacts were unsure why the authorities waited so long to make these arrests. XXXXXXXXXXXX noted that virtually all of those arrested were freed after detentions of about one or two weeks, adding that some of the people on the list provided to PolOff had asked that their names not be publicly reported for fear of further reprisals from the authorities or extremist Sunni citizens. [NOTE: Last month, the religious celebration of the birth of Imam al-Mahdi in al-Ahsa was also broken up by Saudi security forces (ref A). END NOTE]

CLOSING SHIA MOSQUES

4. (C/NF) Many of the myriad towns that comprise the greater al-Ahsa oasis are either entirely Sunni or entirely Shia. XXXXXXXXXXXX said that in Sunni areas there are "forests of [Sunni] mosques" and even in entirely Shia areas there is at least one Sunni mosque. Sunni mosques are generally funded and operated by the Ministry of Endowments (Wizarat al-Awqaaf), and the approval process to build these mosques is straightforward. Sadek joked that if "just one Sunni complains" that he must travel too far to attend mosque the government will approve and fund a new

mosque "tomorrow."

5. (C) According to several contacts, building a Shia mosque in al-Ahsa is very challenging. In 1998, the Saudi authorities announced new licensing requirements for Shia mosques in al-Ahsa and have since closed approximately 20 mosques. Many of these mosques were in operation for more than a decade before being closed. The authorities often used tactics similar to what is currently being done in al-Khobar to force the closures (for more on al-Khobar mosque closings see ref B), including cutting off electricity to the mosques and threatening the arrest of the property owner.

DHAHRAN 00000246 002.2 OF 003

6. (C/NF) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX described the licensing process as inconsistent and difficult to navigate. For example, the designs and building plan for the Imam al-Reda mosque received the necessary approvals from the Ministry of Endowments and municipal authorities. However, after the construction of the building was more than half completed, the governor of al-Ahsa, HH Prince Badr bin Abdullah Al Saud, halted progress citing the building's violation of height restrictions. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told PolOff that his family recently constructed a mosque of a similar height in a different part of al-Ahsa, which received the same approvals. In their view, the arbitrary restrictions on mosques imposed by the Saudi authorities (height, size, proximity to other Shia mosques) are simply sectarian-based harassment and discrimination of the Shia. (NOTE: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX took PolOff on a tour of several Shia mosques in al-Ahsa, including the partially constructed Imam al-Reda mosque, whose construction was stopped for approximately two years. END NOTE)

PRINCE BADR, THE GOVERNOR OF AL-AHSA

7. (C/NF) Several human rights activists in the EP have cited Prince Badr as the source of the sectarian crackdown in al-Ahsa. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX said that the Prince's discrimination against the Shia is "systemic and intentional." XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX who met Prince Badr on several occasions when obtaining approvals for the construction of his family's mosque, believes that the prince is an "all around bad governor" surrounded by "sectarian advisors." Other contacts in the EP have echoed these sentiments. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (strictly protect), a self-proclaimed human rights activist originally from al-Ahsa, believes Badr is "extreme" in

his discrimination. "All of this discrimination nonsense is new [in al-Ahsa]." He recalled as a child that his neighborhood was mixed Shia-Sunni and he was breast-fed by a Shia woman (Ibrahim is from a Sunni family), which he believes is "impossible" today. XXXXXXXXXXXX (strictly protect), the XXXXXXXXXXXX, warned that Prince Badr is "playing with fire" by harassing al-Ahsa's Shia residents.

8. (C/NF) During an initial courtesy call visit to Prince Badr (strictly protect) in March 2009, when sectarian tensions were nearing their peak, Badr told the Consul General that Shia-Sunni relations were "cordial" in al-Ahsa and that there were "no problems" between the "brothers." He said that the foreign media "exaggerates" sectarian problems, but acknowledged that diversity can be a "double-edged sword." He also noted that his primary concern has always been security. King Abdullah recently extended Prince Badr's term as the governor of al-Ahsa for an additional four years. Prince Badr has served as governor of al-Ahsa since 1997, just before the Shia mosques in al-Ahsa were targeted for closure in 1998.

PRINCE BADR HAS SUPPORT FROM THE
INTERIOR MINISTER AND EP GOVERNOR

9. (C) Many of the same contacts who accuse Prince Badr of discrimination in al-Ahsa also view the Eastern Province Governor HRH Prince Mohammed bin Fahd Al Saud and his uncle the Interior Minister HRH Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al Saud as responsible for the problem. Some believe these two powerful princes tacitly support discriminatory practices in al-Ahsa and elsewhere in the EP. Others have even accused the princes of ordering local authorities, such as Prince Badr, to implement discriminatory policies themselves. In any case, as most of our contacts readily point out, neither of the princes have stepped in to end the discrimination.

DISCRIMINATION FOCUSED ON THE YOUTH

10. (C/NF) When asked how the Shia community is reacting to the most recent crackdown, XXXXXXXXXXXX replied that "the discrimination gap is bigger than ever." He was especially worried about the youth, noting that they "don't have a voice that is listened to" and are losing their sense of a "national identity." The vast majority of those recently arrested in al-Ahsa were under the age of 30. He also noted that the sectarian clashes that took place in Medina (ref C) largely involved young men from al-Ahsa. These views echo similar concerns across the Shia community that the youth are increasingly frustrated with the status quo.

COMMENT

11. (C) King Abdullah's recent extension of Prince Badr as governor of al-Ahsa has irked many Shia and human rights activists in the EP who view him as the primary antagonist and barrier to improved sectarian relations. It has also lowered their expectations for positive results from the King's widely publicized interfaith and national dialogues. END COMMENT.
KREUTNER

=====CABLE ENDS=====